

Program pays airfare for families of wounded troops

By Karen Jowers
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Capt. Daniel Gade doesn't remember much about the first month after being wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

"I do remember it was comforting to be surrounded by family. You wake up and see your family, and you think your life is going to be OK," Gade said.

That was possible, because the Army paid for the initial travel of his wife from Alabama and his parents from North Dakota to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington to be at Gade's side after he was injured Jan. 10.

But Gade and his wife, Wendy, also have 3-year-old daughter AnnaGrace, along with a large immediate family. Gade has four siblings, the youngest being a 16-year-old brother.

"Initially, there was such a hurry to get here, because I wasn't expected to survive," Gade said.

That's where Operation Hero Miles came in. The program flew in five more family members from places such as Fargo, N.D.; Birm-

ingham, Ala.; and Atlanta.

"All those people had tickets within 24 hours," Gade said.

Family members have come and gone as many as three times during his convalescence, and the Hero Miles program also paid for those subsequent flights.

"My parents are both school teachers, and the money is not there for trips to D.C.," Gade said.

Hero Miles also paid for Wendy and AnnaGrace to fly to Florida with Gade to meet with his prosthetist. Gade's leg was amputated at the hip.

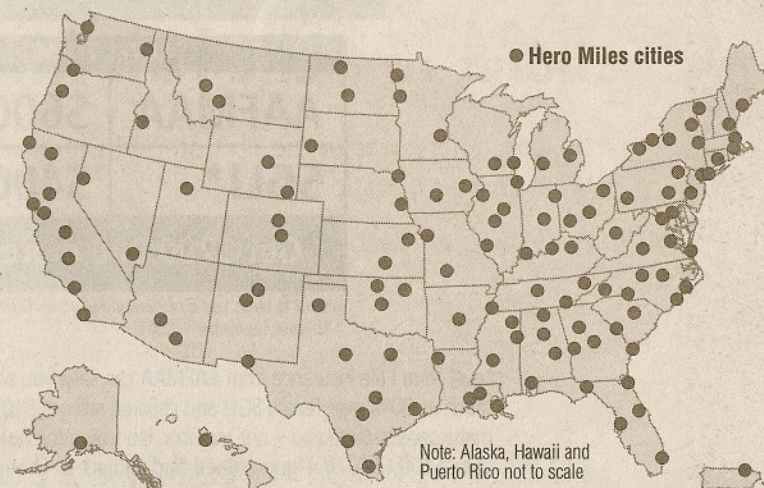
Wounded troops, such as Gade, and their families have received nearly 4,000 airline tickets — totaling about 140 million airline miles — through Operation Hero Miles since the spring of 2004.

The program, designated only for troops wounded in Operations Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom, helps pay for the travel of those who need to be together during convalescence.

Eight airlines are participating, donating tickets or allowing their customers to donate their own fre-

140 MILLION MILES AND COUNTING

Since Operation Hero Miles began in 2004, more than 4,000 loved ones of wounded family members have logged 140 million miles to U.S. cities large and small. Troops also use the miles to travel home for extra convalescent leave. Where people have flown using the Hero Miles:



Airline partners accepting donated miles:

Alaska Airlines	American Airlines	Northwest Airlines
America West Airlines	Delta Air Lines	

All of the above also have made corporate donations to the program, as well as have the following airlines: Continental Airlines, Independence Air, Southwest Airlines and USAirways. Agreements with AirTran Airways are in the works.

Source: Fisher House Foundation

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER, TIMES STAFF

quent-flier miles: Alaska Airlines, America West, American Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Airlines, Independence Air, Northwest Airlines and USAirways. AirTran Airways is expected to begin booking donated flights soon.

Southwest Airlines has participated in the past.

"We're doing well in terms of donated miles," said David Coker, executive director of the Fisher House Foundation, which oversees the program.

TO DONATE MILES

Five airlines let their customers donate frequent-flier miles to the Operation Hero Miles program.

Alaska Airlines: Call Mileage Plan at (800) 654-5669. Have account information available.

Northwest Airlines: Call (800) 327-2881. Have WorldPerks account number and PIN available.

America West, American and Delta airlines: Go to the Fisher House Web site, www.fisherhouse.org. Click on the Hero Miles page and scroll to "How to donate miles."

For information about getting airline tickets for relatives of troops injured or wounded in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom, go to www.fisherhouse.org. Click on the Hero Miles page, and scroll to the section titled "Assistance." □

Gade said having his family near was a big factor in his recovery.

"I was semiconscious for about 10 days after I regained consciousness, and was intubated with a breathing tube," he said. "I guess I was fighting the breathing tube. ... It was obviously bothering me a great deal. My wife's voice was the only thing that would calm me. They tell me my eyes would be seeking her around the room."

"Hero Miles has absolutely taken care of hundreds and hundreds of troops," Gade said. "It's really a fantastic deal, and has nothing to do with your rank or your position. I have the utmost appreciation for the people who have donated." □